A WORLD CONFERENCE OF THE CHURCHES

OXFORD 1937

PRICE 2d.

Conference on Church, Community and State
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NOTE

This pamphlet is concerned with one aspect of the movement towards unity among the divided Christian Churches which is represented in our day by three great interdenominational and interconfessional bodies.

The International Missionary Council grew out of the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910; the World Conference on Faith and Order held its first meeting in Lausanne, 1927, and will meet again in Edinburgh, August 1937; the Universal Christian Council on Life and Work was formed as the result of a world conference of the Churches in Stockholm, 1925, and is convening a second such conference in Oxford, 1937. All three represent efforts on a world scale to reach greater unity of faith and action among the different Churches; all three include representatives of all the Churches except the Roman Catholic (though some Roman Catholics maintain unofficial contact with them). They take as their respective spheres missionary activity, questions of faith and the nature and structure of the Church, and the work and witness of the Church in society. Clearly these spheres are bound to overlap and the movements are mutually complementary. This pamphlet is an attempt to interpret the work of one section—the Universal Christian Council—as illustrated by the Oxford Conference: but it is acknowledged that the full significance of this can only be seen in relation to the work of the other two sections.

A WORLD CONFERENCE OF THE CHURCHES ON CHURCH, COMMUNITY AND STATE

Oxford, July 12-26, 1937

THE situation confronting Christian people in the modern world is one of the utmost gravity. Not only, in common with all men, do they face a world of nations beset by fear and dangerously near to war but there are certain factors which at once place the whole future of religion in jeopardy and question the spiritual adequacy of the Church. Once you look outside the comparative security of Great Britain, it becomes by no means certain whether, and in what forms, organised religion will survive the issue of those conflicts in which passionate movements are engaged; while those movements themselves, taking on the characteristics of religion, show mankind turning away from Christian faith to the worship of older gods, more readily worshipped because they hold sway over the immediate needs of men. This apostasy itself, and the fact that the faiths that claim man's allegiance display a more immediate relevance to human needs, are a measure of the remoteness of much Christian thought and conviction from the day to day interests of mankind.

This may be illustrated by reference to two events which have only recently come to dominate the minds of men : the rise of totalitarian states, and the Spanish Civil War.

The emergence and consolidation of political systems which have ceased to be purely political and have taken on the characteristics of religion, have fundamentally altered our situation. In a number of different parts of the world the same basic phenomenon is to be observed—the assumption by the secular power of rights covering the whole of man's life, invading the religious sphere, and denying the freedom of the human spirit. In Russia the Christian Church has met with direct persecution. In Germany the issue is still in doubt, but the demands of the state make religious education almost impossible and so threaten the roots of the Church. In Japan absolutism is vested with the prestige of

the ancient religion of Shintoism. It is a real question whether, under these circumstances, the Church can survive in any form with which we are familiar, and certainly doubtful whether it can act as an oecumenical, universal society. In many places it has already entered a period of persecution, and may well have to take again to the catacombs.

The Spanish Civil War has illuminated our situation with deadly clarity. It is clear that the interests at stake extend far outside the confines of Spain itself, and that a European conflagration has been almost unavoidable because nations and classes sympathetic to one or other of the belligerent parties have desired to intervene. Mankind may well be dividing into two great camps, neither of which is wholly confined within national boundaries, but which recognise their mutual antagonism and accept ultimate conflict as inevitable. The rival banners of these two groups are Fascism and Communism, under either of which we may easily march to disaster. The Spanish tragedy has also shewn that one great Church is prepared to take sides, while other Churches find themselves divided.

In such a situation the most urgent question is whether there can emerge a body of men and women of such passionate Christian conviction that the movement they represent is more significant and more enduringly formative of the life of man than the secular, a-Christian forces which at present have us in their grip. Can the essential nature of the Church come home to us in such power that the driving force of society becomes again authentic Christian faith?

The Church itself.

No one can pretend that the Church, in the sense of the totality of Christian denominations, is at all prepared to meet this grave situation. It is divided in thought, confused in counsel, uncertain of its message. It can neither act coherently as a body, nor can it give clear guidance to those portions of it which stand most in need of succour and advice. What have we to say to the leaders of the Church in Manchuria in the intense conflict of loyalities into which Japan's action has precipitated them? What have we to say concerning the relation of Church and State that is relevant to the position of Christian people in a totalitarian country?

What have we to say, in our own apparently secure country, concerning the Church's duty towards the unemployed, or those divided loyalties that are focussed in the question of military service? It is not too much to say that Church leaders of equal standing in the respect of men offer diametrically opposite advice to a Christian conscience already sufficiently tortured by conflicting claims.

These are not questions that concern the leaders of the churches only, although it is right that we should expect guidance from them. The world in which the ordinary Christian lives is being shaped by forces of which he is largely unaware, the essential nature of which he cannot discern. The faith in which he has been brought up, well-fitted though it may be to give guidance and strength in questions of personal conduct and integrity, is ill-equipped for dealing with a great emergency. Although Christianity was born in insecurity and fashioned in catastrophe, the faith of most of us has been nurtured in the tradition of a stable world. That tradition no longer holds, and the faith we need is one that fits us to live in an unstable and even violent society.

The difficulty is not only one of instability. It is also due to the vast scale on which human problems arise. The increasing material interdependence of the world delivers the destiny of the average citizen into the control of forces which, in the nature of the case, he cannot control. His livelihood may be taken from him by an event in some far-distant part of the earth, or his life set in jeopardy by the sudden development of a political situation of which he is wholly unaware. In contrast, his religious faith is usually a thing of very limited and parochial dimensions, having little or nothing to do with the things that mould his life.

It is easy for this language to appear highly-coloured to British people, for we seem almost wholly to have escaped the impact of those movements, such as Fascism and Communism, which have shattered or entirely reshaped the life of other countries. By contrast we feel almost incredibly secure. Yet this sense of security, and the temptation to insularity of outlook which it engenders, are deeply suspect when we remember that the security we enjoy derives in no small measure from the fact that we are an Imperial Power, and as such peculiarly exposed to the changes and

chances of the world. We are bound both to the East and to the West— and both are in ferment. Moreover, if we look candidly at our own life within Great Britain, we can discern the interplay of those very forces of prejudice and privilege, hypocrisy and pride, which it is so easy to see in others and so hard to observe in ourselves. In any case, even if we were tempted on secular grounds to give thanks we are not as other men are, it is impossible for the Christian to remain thus isolated from his brethren. The Christian is a member of a universal society which, by its very nature, denies insularity; and only as we enter into the situation of our brethren with sympathy and insight can we help them at all. We need, no less than they, a faith commensurate at once with the Being of God and with the tasks He sets us.

A World Conference.

In this situation and aware of these great issues, a Conference of the Churches will meet in Oxford from July 12th to 25th, 1937. There will be 400 delegates, of whom 300 will be official representatives of the Churches, and 100 will be co-opted by the Universal Christian Council on Life and Work which is arranging the Conference. They will come from all over the world, from America, India, Africa, the Far East, Germany, France, Scandinavia, the Balkans. They will represent offiicially all Christian Churches, with the exception of the Roman Catholic Communion, though touch has been maintained with that Communion in the preparatory work. They will comprise both laymen and clergy. They will seek by thought, discussion and prayer to discern God's will in relation to the questions at issue in " Church, Community and State." The preparatory work carried on over the past three years has drawn into the ambit of the conference several hundred scholars and experts, representing widely different national and cultural traditions, who, although not all of them will be able to attend the Conference, have willingly made their convictions available by means of memoranda.

The Conference will concern itself with five main questions, each of which will first be worked over by a special section and

then considered by the Conference as a whole. These questions are as follows :—

1. *The Church and the Common Life.*

The question here is that of the relation of the Church as a redeemed community owning first allegiance to Christ, to the common, general life in which Christians as well as others share, and in which they have their responsibilities to fulfil. The term " Common Life " or " Community " denotes those relationships, various aspects of which find expression in such words as society, nation or country, which are wider than the control and activities of organised government.

2. *The Church and the State.*

This issue has been lifted out of the sphere of academic discussion by the emergence of systems of government which, in order to accomplish their task, are making an absolute claim on the loyalty of their citizens. What is the relation of members and representatives of the Church to the claims of organised government?

3. *Church, Community and State in relation to the Economic Order.*

The urgency of the economic problems of our day does not need to be emphasised, but it is far from clear in what way the Church is concerned with them. We have already suggested that the modern world may be rent between Fascism and Communism. These are living faiths : but they are also economic systems, representing different views of the fundamental question of property. What has the Church to say that is relevant to our social and economic life to-day?

4. *Church, Community and State in relation to Education.*

The significance of education is clearly seen by the totalitarian state. If you want a particular kind of citizen, pledged to particular ends, you must begin in the schools. In the democratic countries education is left also, very largely, to the state, with the hope that Christian opinion will be able to direct the ends of education from within. Yet the Church has—or should have—a definite view of man which governs the education it should seek : a view of man which is in large measure discarded by all secular societies. What

then is the duty of the Church, and what are the limits of the competence of the State in this question?

5. *The Universal Church and the World of Nations.*

This section includes a consideration of the Church's attitude to war, and there may need to be a special sub-section working on this specific problem. But, in general, there is obviously much perplexity concerning the claims of the Church, as a universal, oecumenical society, essentially supra-national, and the definite claims of nation-states of all kinds in the world of conflicting national interests.

Now these are all questions on which Christian opinion is divided. They are all of them urgent and real in the life of individual Christians. How far the Conference will reach common agreement it is impossible to say, but it is pledged to record honestly the major differences and the points of agreement. The conference itself has no legislative authority : the findings will be referred to the constituent churches, by whom they must be considered.

The Perspective.

It has already been pointed out that preparations have been in train, under the direction of the Research Committtee of the Universal Christian Council, for a period of 3 years. Under the leadership of Dr. J. H. Oldham, international groups of theologians, philosophers, economists, and others have met and discussed, exchanged papers and criticised each other's findings, in an endeavour to clarify the issues and point towards solutions. Some of the results of this process will be published in a series of books in the course of next summer, and all will be accessible to the chairmen of the five sections. What has been begun is a wide movement of re-thinking and reformulation of Christian conviction, which should enable the Christian Churches to act more coherently in the new situation that they have to meet in the modern world.

When it is remembered that the various branches of the Church have often been relatively isolated from one another, and that the situation of each has been specific and has held its own immediate problems, it will be evident that this process of interchange, and the still slower process of reaching a common mind, must necessarily take time. It cannot be achieved in three years, or by a single conference : rather

must the whole of this preparatory work and the conference itself be seen as the beginning of a movement, the completion of which we cannot foresee, which must be maintained for some years. Only so can Christian thought and practice be rightly and consistently related to those baffling problems which at the moment find us distraught and impotent.

Have we time ?

No one can contemplate with equanimity the convening of a conference in the present world situation. We cannot even depend on its being able to meet at all; for at any moment the international tensions may prove insupportable, and another World War shatter western civilisation. How much more absurd to envisage a long process of thought and research, stretching into an unpredictable future! And, in any case, is not action, rather than thought, the crying need of a desperate world?

Such questions must needs arise to haunt the minds of all those who are in any degree responsible for this work. The first thing to be said is that the Christian knows that man lives by the mercy of God, and that no situation therefore is without hope or without redemption. God may still grant us " time for true repentance and amendment of life." Further, it is no part of the primary concern of the Christian to save western civilisation. Western civilisation is a mixture of good and bad, and, in common with all other forms of human life, is in the hands and under the judgment of God. To hold on to it undiscriminatingly is to lack discernment of the real issues; for the test of any human society is whether it is consonant with God's kingdom. The measure of our apostasy in the West is the measure of the certainty of our doom. That is why the rediscovery of the essential nature of the Church as the nucleus of a new order of life rooted in the reality of God is so urgent.

It may well be that God will not give us the time we need to heal the breaches in His Church and enable her to act more in accordance with His Will; that may come only through her martyrdom. But that does not relieve us of the duty of seeking, by all the means in our power, to discover and

give effect to His Will. It may be that, before this work is done, Europe will be thrown back into a confusion as desperate as the Dark Ages from which she emerged with such slow travail; but, in that case, it may yet be the Church that once again reveals the foundations on which human life may be rightly built. It may be that, just as the work of Karl Marx has become the basis of the New Russia and the focus-point of passionate hope, so out of this movement of the Christian mind and spirit a new order may arise worthy of the name of Christendom.

We do not know; but we do know that for this to happen something more than thought will be required. The besetting sin of the Church is the separation of thought and action, so that even dedication may become a theory. Only as we respond in action to the light we see, and as we seek in complete dedication for further light, have our thought and action any significance; and it is only the living reality of God that can set us free from the fear of catastrophe, and liberate us to think clearly and act courageously.

The Church is composed predominantly of ordinary lay folk in ordinary jobs in the world. They are not wiser than other men; rather is their hall-mark a certain despair of human wisdom. But they believe that God can still make His Will known, and that His purpose of salvation still stands. They face the same dark world and unknown future as others do; but they know in Whose hands lies the destiny of men. They share the confusion of mind that is common to all in the modern world, and, therefore, must seek for guidance and for renewed clarity. The Oxford Conference is a small part of this effort to discover what God wants us to do. If we discover that, the test is action.

BOOKS

The following books are recommended to those who wish to go further into the matter to be discussed at the Oxford Conference :—

Church, State, Community, a World Issue, by J. H. OLDHAM (S.C.M. 1/-).

Religion and the Modern State, by CHRISTOPHER DAWSON (Sheed & Ward. 6/-).

Church and State on the European Continent, by ADOLF KELLER (Epworth Press. 6/-).

An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, by REINHOLD NIEBUHR (S.C.M. 6/-).

Christianity in the Eastern Conflicts : a study in Christianity, Communism and Nationalism in Asia, by W. PATON (Edinburgh House Press. 2/6d. ready January 1st).

Church and State in Contemporary America, by ADAMS BROWN (Scribners).

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